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ABSTRACT

A study of gay men and their experiences of "coming out" to their parents found that both the mother's and father's reported level of education and religious orthodoxy significantly predicted the relationship change between the mother or the father and the self-disclosing son. This study sought to broaden the available database by sampling both gay males (N=75) and lesbian females (N=28), and by evaluating how differences in various factors (social support, personal problem solving skills, and family problem solving skills) might differ for those who have, versus those who have not, disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents. Subjects completed an 8-page booklet containing questions about demographic characteristics, various Likert-type scales assessing parental relationship variables, the Personal Problem Solving Inventory, the Family Problem Solving subscale of the McMaster Family Assessment Device, the Gay Lifestyle Satisfaction Scale, the Provision of Social Relations Scale, and the Religious Orthodoxy Scale. Data were analyzed according to whether participants had chosen to disclose their sexual orientation to their parents. Females who had not disclosed rated their families as possessing poor problem solving skills. Neither current parental relationships nor personal problem solving skills were predictive of life style satisfaction, while a measure of social support was related. Only temporary changes in parental relationships were reported following disclosure. (Author/NB)

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Sexual Orientation Disclosure to Parents:

Problem Solving and Social Support

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Abstract

One hundred and five gay and lesbian participants completed a series of questionnaires concerning family problem solving, personal problem solving, parental religious orthodoxy, social support, and life style satisfaction. Data were analyzed according to whether participants had chosen to disclose their sexual orientation to parents. Female participants who had not disclosed their sexual orientation rated their families as possessing poor problem solving skills. Neither current parental relationships nor personal problem solving skills were predictive of life style satisfaction, while a measure of social support was related. Finally, only temporary changes in parental relationships were reported following disclosure.

Sexual Orientation Disclosure to Parents: Problem Solving and Social Support

Several author's have suggested that disclosing one's sexual orientation or "coming out" is a significant factor in the identity formation of gay men and lesbian women (e.g., McDonld, 1982; Plummer, 1975). Although disclosure of a homosexual orientation to parents has been viewed as a particularly salient concern, there are few empirical studies which can be used to understand this process. Specifically, there are few studies which clinicians can draw upon when advising clients about the relevant variables which can be used to predict post-disclosure parental relationships.

A notable exception to this lack of data is a study published by Cramer & Roach (1988). These investigators sampled gay men about their experience of coming out to their parents. They found that both the mother's and father's reported level of education and religious orthodoxy significantly predicted the relationship change between the mother or the father and the self-disclosing son.

The present study sought to broaden the available data base by sampling both gay males and lesbian females. We also evaluated how differences in various factors (social support, personal problem solving skills, and family problem solving skills) might differ for those who have, versus those who have not, disclosed their sexual orientation to parents. Finally, we attempted to replicate the Cramer and Roach (1988) findings which suggested that parental religious dogmatism is related to whether

males disclose their sexual orientation to parents.

Subjects and Procedures

Subjects were obtained by contacting various gay and lesbian social, political and employee groups located within a major midwestern city. After receiving permission, the first author attended the regularly scheduled group meetings and administered the questionnaires during the meetings. This procedure was adopted to counter the problem of low response rates associated with other research in this area (e.g., 20% return rate obtained by Cramer & Roach, 1988).

Eighty homosexual males and thirty-seven lesbian females were administered the booklet which contained the questionnaires in groups ranging from 4 to 23 persons. However, the responses of five males and nine females were not included in the data analyses since substantial proportions of the questionnaire were not completed or, if completed were completed in a manner which did not allow ready interpretation.

Materials

An 8 page booklet was developed which contained questions about demographic characteristics and various Likert-type scales assessing parental relationship variables. Booklets also contained the following assessment devices: (1) the Personal Problem Solving Inventory (Heppner, 1988); (2) the Family Problem Solving subscale of the McMaster Family Assessment Device (Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop, 1983); the Gay Lifestyle Satisfaction Scale (Cramer & Roach, 1988), (4) the Provision of Social Relations Scale (Turner, Frankel & Levin, 1983), and the Religious Orthodoxy Scale (Putney & Middleton, 1961).

Results

Subject Characteristics. To assess for differences between subjects on age, level of education, or the degree of exclusively same-sex dating behaviors, a 2 (male versus female) by 2 (out-to-parents versus not-out-to-parents) MANOVA was conducted using age, level of education, and exclusiveness as the dependent variables. Wilk's Lambda was significant and follow-up F-tests showed that people who were out-to-parents were significantly younger than those who had not disclosed their sexual orientation, $F = 13.34$, $p < .05$. No other significant differences were found. Table 1 lists the means and standard deviations for age, level of education, and exclusiveness.

Mediating Factors. We next tested our hypothesis that personal problem solving skills, family problem solving skills, and levels of social support would be higher in those who had disclosed their sexual orientation to parents. A MANCOVA was next conducted using these three scores as the dependent variable and age as a covariate. Results showed a significant interaction between gender and out-to-parents status for family problem solving style, $F = 3.84$, $p < .05$. As can be seen from Figure 1, females who had not disclosed their sexual orientation rated their family problem solving styles more poorly than the other 3 groups. Interestingly, a similar MANCOVA conducted on parental religious fundamentalism failed to reveal any significant group differences. Table 2 lists the means and standard deviations for these variables.

Changes in Parental Relationships. We also asked subjects

who had disclosed their orientation to retrospectively rate their relationship to their parents before disclosure and after disclosure, as well as currently. For these data we conducted a Mixed Model MANOVA on ratings of maternal and paternal relationship using gender as the between subject factor and the three ratings as the within subject factors. A significant interaction was noted for the relationship between gender and the initial ratings of the relationship. Prior to disclosure same sex parental relationships were reported as being strained. That is, women rated their relationships with their mothers as most negative, whereas men rated their relationship with their fathers most poorly. Within subject effects were found for relationship with one's mother, $F = 10.35$, $p < .05$, and for relationship with one's father, $F = 10.57$, $p < .05$. No other significant effects were found. As can be seen from Figure 2, relationships with parents tended to decrease after disclosure of sexual orientation and then to increase overtime.

Satisfaction Level. To assess for potential differences in levels of satisfaction with a gay lifestyle, a MANCOVA was conducted using satisfaction rating as the dependent variable. No significant results were found. Finally, we assessed how current relationship with parents, personal problem solving skills, and social support might be related to level of satisfaction. Multiple regression analyses revealed only ratings of social supports to be related to current satisfaction.

Discussion

Results suggest that the relationships between participants and their parents were only temporarily upset by the disclosure

of one's sexual orientation. Furthermore, poor family problem solving appeared to effect solely the lesbian subjects decisions regarding self-disclosure. These and other findings will be discussed in terms of our ongoing research in this area.

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Table 1

Relevant Subject Characteristics Arranged by Gender and Status

	Out-to-Parents	Not-Out-to-Parents
Current Age		
Males		
M	33.45	43.90
SD	9.35	13.87
Females		
M	32.81	39.56
SD	5.40	10.68
Education		
Males		
M	14.60	15.80
SD	2.80	2.60
Females		
M	14.71	15.00
SD	2.53	1.87
Exclusiveness		
Males		
M	12.29	11.53
SD	2.46	2.08
Females		
M	11.82	12.14
SD	2.29	2.34

Note: Education is coded as years completed; Exclusiveness refers to the degree to which individual rated themselves on a 7-point Likert-type scale as having (a) totally homosexual feelings and/or attractions and (b) engaging in totally homosexual dating behavior.

Table 2

Hypothesized Mediator Variables Arranged by Gender and Status

	Out-to-Parents	Not-Out-to-Parents
Social Support		
Males		
M	28.02	30.50
SD	6.48	3.84
Females		
M	29.81	31.00
SD	7.12	6.76
PSI Score		
Males		
M	90.93	91.06
SD	18.10	15.64
Females		
M	86.85	85.44
SD	20.81	17.23
Family PS		
Males		
M	13.61	16.29
SD	2.46	5.32
Females		
M	13.25	10.22
SD	6.19	5.50
Orthodoxy		
Males		
M	33.86	37.82
SD	15.91	19.04
Females		
M	35.61	34.28
SD	16.60	17.42

Note: Social Support = scores obtained on the Provisions of Social Relations scale; PSI Score = scores obtained on the Personal Problem Solving Inventory; Family PS = score obtained on the Family Problem Solving subscale of the family Assessment Device; Orthodoxy = ratings of maternal and paternal religious dogmatism obtained on the religious orthodoxy scale.

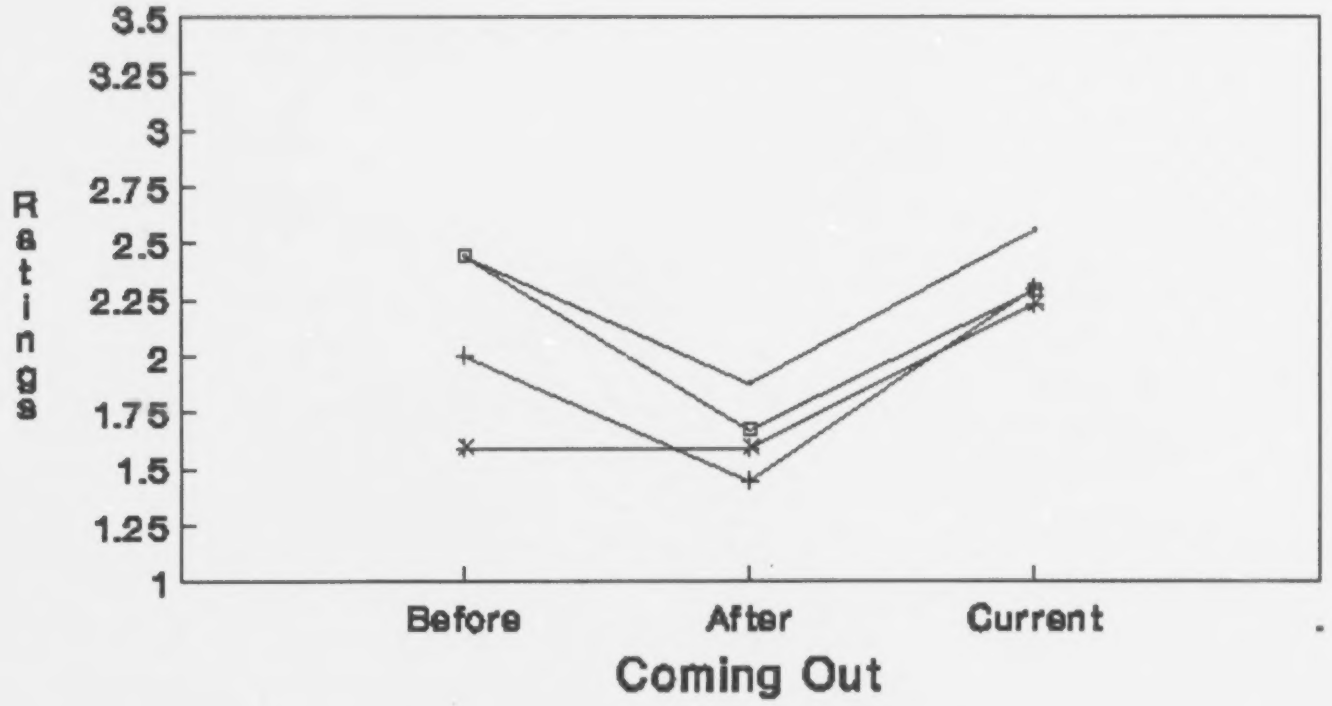
Table 3

Life Style Satisfaction Ratings Arranged by Gender and Status

	Out-to-Parents	Not-Out-to-Parents
Satisfaction		
Males		
M	50.57	48.15
SD	7.37	7.23
Females		
M	52.75	51.42
SD	3.24	6.76

Note: Satisfaction = scores obtained on the Gay Lifestyle Satisfaction Scale.

Parental Relationship



high ratings are positive

Family Problem Solving